

# ONLY YOU

a fuyuhiko/peko fanzine

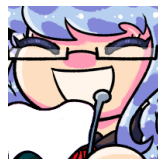
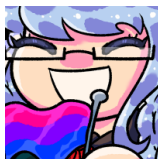
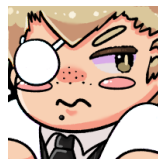
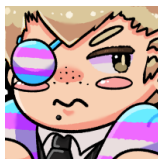


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# A Conspiracy at Twilight

By KawaiiGroovycat

When the Noxian Crown Prince's father announced to him that the king of Lumen had honored them with the betrothal of him to the Crown Princess Mahiru, Fuyuhiko felt as though his intestines had been gently pulled out and now he was being forced to look at them.

It sounded laughable at the time. The two kingdoms had been at odds for seemingly all of history. But apparently, the two kings had met by chance on neutral ground and had come to an accord—a swift end to the war in exchange for a marriage of states.

Fuyuhiko had resigned himself to this arranged marriage—for the sake of his nation, his family—Mahiru would be his wife, because he was Nox's crown prince and responsible for carrying forward the honor of the Kuzuryu dynasty. But that didn't stop him from crying huddled in the lap of his loyal knight Peko in private, crying at the chilling finality like a child, over being promised to a complete stranger from a hostile kingdom, one he could never grow to love, not the way he loved his family and his knight.

At the time, Peko had put a hand on her young master's shoulder and said, "Please, Young Master, do not let your heart grow bitter. This does not change anything. I will remain your tool to use as needed."

The words had been temporarily effective, but deep down they almost made Fuyuhiko feel worse. But even so, he wiped his face and returned to being the perpetually angry heir, who didn't cry and make a fool of himself, who needed to be strong in order to eventually lead his family and his nation, not the other way around. Fuyuhiko would fight and he would hope.

Tragically, it wouldn't be good enough.



Spring had finally come, and it was Fuyuhiko's turn to be wed. The Lumenese royal family had traveled for two fortnights to the capital city of their neighboring kingdom, and new ally. They had arrived about a day ago, tired from the long journey. There had unfortunately not been much time for them to rest, as the preparations for the royal wedding had been in full swing and many formal documents for agreements to sign.

He was wearing a striped hakama, black kimono and haori of the montsuki traditional for grooms, embroidered with the white emblem of the Kuzuryu dynasty. He hated every single inch of the outfit, but he didn't fidget. He couldn't, especially not in front of his family.

Fuyuhiko wondered if Mahiru felt as uncomfortable in her clothing as he did in his. Come to think of it, he had barely caught a glimpse of her as her family had arrived in the capital. He saw little of her before this moment, but it had seemed like the same couldn't be said for his sister.

Natsumi had hated Mahiru since before she even arrived in Nox, and she hadn't made her feelings a secret. In fact, she loved to tell her retainer Hajime everything she thought about Mahiru, and didn't seem to really care whether Fuyuhiko happened to catch wind of what she was saying. He had tried to tune her out, but the retainer accompanying Mahiru obviously couldn't.

If there was one thing Fuyuhiko had always known about Natsumi, it was that she had been crazy since the moment she was born. But badmouthing his bride the night before they were to marry, within earshot of the knight who always followed her? That



was a war just waiting to happen. But even so, he had tried to keep his focus on what would be happening the next day.

He would be marrying Mahiru. As much as he didn't want to deep down, it probably wouldn't be as terrible as he was making it out to be in his mind. If nothing else, it was likely that Mahiru was at least not as awful as Natsumi thought she was.

He forces his mind to stay in the present—where the hell was she? He must have been waiting for at least half an hour and she still hadn't arrived. He looked at the left side of the audience, where Mahiru's family filled the rows of wooden pews. And then he looked at the right side, where his family would be...

Okay, forgetting about Mahiru, where the hell was Natsumi? She wasn't in the audience at the very front like he would have expected her to be, and he knew for damn certain that she wouldn't miss the opportunity to grin at him 'encouragingly'. Her absence only increased Fuyuhiko's discomfort. He could feel sweat gathering down his back and between his shoulder blades, and this stupid kimono was unbearably itchy, but he couldn't even scratch as the sweat made it worse.

And then he heard someone scream. A few moments later, everything went to hell, and Fuyuhiko realized that all of his hopes weren't enough and nothing would ever be okay again.



Peko had stood behind her young master all throughout the funeral of Natsumi Kuzuryu, and remained with him when Natsumi was cremated. He was holding up rather well. So far, he hadn't lashed out at anyone or run away to sulk and brood. She knew, of course, that he would never do such a thing. Not in front of his family, and not even at a time like this.

And especially not in front of the Lumenese royal family, who appropriately looked like nervous prisoners. They hadn't been allowed to leave since Natsumi's body was discovered outside the palace walls, having fallen to her death from a balcony. But of course, it would never be as neat and simple as just a 'fall'. Though nobody had explicitly stated it, she knew that both her young master and the rest of the family suspected foul play, and probably rightfully so.

After the funeral, her young master stormed the palace halls, and Peko followed closely behind. She didn't know where he was going or what he intended to do now, and it wasn't her place to ask him. But even so, this wasn't safe. If the same person who had undoubtedly assassinated Natsumi were to get to him...

"Young Master—"

"Just leave me alone, Peko." He swatted back at her.

Peko remained where she stood, silently. "I am sure you understand what I've been tasked to do since the beginning. With tensions as high as they are, I cannot break my oath."

Her young master turned on his heel and barked at her, "What part of alone do you not understand?!"

"Forgive me for being so bold, Young Master. I am only your tool, so—"

"Shut up, Peko! I don't need a tool, and I don't need anybody! So just leave me alone!"

He bolted before Peko could say or do anything else. Peko stood there for a moment in the hall, and then when enough time had gone by, slowly passed through without making a sound.



Somehow, Peko knew deep down that her young master was going to seek revenge on the assassin. A slight against his family was a slight against him personally, and that he could never forgive. She could almost pity whoever this assassin was if she hadn't looked at the current suspects and seen how guilty each of them looked.

There was the faerie friend of Princess Mahiru's, Hiyoko Saionji. Nothing about her seemed suspicious on the surface. Hiyoko was small enough that it would have been difficult for her to push Princess Natsumi from the balcony, even if she had taken her by surprise. That itself should have been impossible, given that Sir Hajime should have been there and he was an apt enough defender...

...but Princess Natsumi had still died, and Sir Hajime had ended up with a concussion from a hard blow to the head and a slash through his chest that could very well have killed him. Even so, Hiyoko was an athlete, in a sense, given that she was a talented and nimble dancer. So that would have to be taken into account. That, and, those of her species couldn't be trusted no matter how much she claimed to be fond of humans.

Peko supposed that Princess Mahiru herself was also a suspect, if what the king and queen had said after finding their daughter's body was anything to go by. *They had planned this*, they had claimed. *Those filthy Lumenese are hungry for war*. Though, Peko wasn't certain of Princess Mahiru's physical prowess, and nothing else about her stood out to her as suspicious or even particularly remarkable. On the other hand...

Even more suspect was her retainer, Sir Kazue Satou, who usually just went by her family name. She was sour and defensive, and followed her liege like a shadow. She seemed to have an ever-present scowl on her face whenever she looked at anyone—or



anything—that wasn't Princess Mahiru. Peko could personally understand that devotion, but if the Lumenese truly were seeking to betray them all along, that devotion made Sir Satou as suspect as anyone else. She more than likely had the athleticism to do it.

Peko wondered if she was just being paranoid, or if her young master was thinking the same thing as her.

Peko had not had a moment of sleep since Princess Natsumi's assassination. Death was not normally something that kept her awake, and it wasn't as though she hadn't killed people before. It was a necessary evil that was part of serving the crown. She would slit throats swiftly, then sleep that same night. The stench of sweat and copper would haunt her dreams, and she'd have trouble keeping food down the next morning, but she slept.

Except this time, she was not by her young master's side.

He didn't want her help. He didn't want her to do anything for him. He didn't even want her to gather any information.

Thus, instead of sleeping, she trained, swinging her blade into the night like a wild beast. A sword was a strange and beautiful thing. One swing of a blade could communicate more than a lifetime of words, but ultimately it served one function, to kill. A sword only responded to flesh with the force applied by its wielder, and communicated only that which the wielder wished to. It had no thoughts of its own, no feelings of its own, and no actions that are not to its wielder's desires.

A sword was silent and obedient. It had to be, lest it hurt its master. But even so, the sword is never asked why it was not drawn in time, nor why its master has fallen, nor even whether it is fine with sitting in its sheath and waiting for another master.

A sword should have no thoughts or feelings of its own. But Peko was imperfect. She couldn't stop thinking, she couldn't stop feeling, and...it was no wonder why her young master didn't want to use her, no wonder why he couldn't trust her, no wonder why he hated her. She was a sword, a *tool*, no more and no less. Or at least, she should have been, and perhaps the fact that she should've been meant that she wasn't.

He told her that he didn't need her or anybody else. That was the same thing as ordering her to leave him alone, right? She wouldn't be to blame for what happened to him in that case, and—no. No, no no no no no *no*.

The purpose of a sword was to keep the blood off of the wielder's hands and spare them the pain that settled in their bones that came with the act of murder. Peko could not do much else for her young master except for that, but it was her function and she would do it, orders be damned.

Peko knew her young master well enough to know that he would go after Princess Natsumi's assassin himself. Whoever it was among the three primary suspects, they were all connected by one person: Princess Mahiru herself.



Peko trailed Princess Mahiru that night without her ever suspecting or looking back. But then, not many people turned around to look at their own shadow being cast behind them, did they?

The fact that she was even outside at night in a castle that was not her own was suspect enough for Peko to lose all doubts in her mind and heart. She knew—as well as the guards hiding in the shadows all around—that Princess Mahiru was guilty, whether she had dealt the killing blow or not.

Princess Mahiru had turned and stepped out into the balcony, leaning dangerously out over the rail, staring down at the ground—where Princess Natsumi had met her end. Peko drew her sword and blocked the entrance from the balcony.

“Princess Mahiru Koizumi of Lumen,” she said, coldly but with not a hint of malice or any other emotion to speak of.

Princess Mahiru turned around sharply, gripping the balcony rail behind her and shrinking as Peko slowly stepped forward. “Y-You’re...”

Peko lowered her sword, turning it so that the blade caught the moonlight in a silvery line. “You know who I am and why I’m here, so don’t ask. Leave the questioning to me.”

“But—But I didn’t—”

Peko’s grip on her sword tightened. “What didn’t you do? Tell me.”

“I...I know this...” Princess Mahiru stammered. “I know my being here looks bad, but I didn’t kill Princess Natsumi, I swear!”

Peko twisted the sword, as if to let Princess Mahiru know that the edge would come for her if she invited it. “Then why are you back here, at the scene of her death?”

Princess Mahiru’s lip trembled, and her shoulders shook. She turned her head, glancing back over the rail, before turning her head back around...

...and being met by the tip of Peko’s sword at her throat.

“You have blood on your hands,” Peko said coldly. “But I can believe you didn’t kill Princess Natsumi if you tell me who did.

There is no way you don't know. So tell me, while you can still talk."

"I...I can't--"

"You can, and you will. Who killed her?"

"N-No, I won't--"

"Who. Killed. Her?"

"You can't make me--"

Peko pressed the blade in and slit a red mark on Princess Mahiru's throat with the finesse of a calligrapher.

"Perhaps I cannot make you talk," Peko said, "but I am more than capable of making you stop."

Princess Mahiru gasped as blood trickled down her neck, staining the collar of her gown as red as her hair.

"I-I...Satou...I didn't order her to do it, I swear! She...she was always standing up for me after Princess Natsumi said horrible things to me. And to her...I didn't realize it at the time, but...after the princess's death, something was...wrong with her. She always acted...on edge, from then on. I thought it was natural after what had happened, but...eventually I figured out it was her...but even so, I didn't understand what had happened or why she would, and I didn't want Princess Natsumi to die, honest! Please don't kill me, I didn't do anything wrong!"

Peko withdrew her sword. It had served its purpose, so she sheathed it. Princess Mahiru sank down against the railing, clutching her throat.



“You should retreat while you can,” Peko warned. “Because of Satou, war is on the horizon once again.”

She didn’t wait for a response from Princess Mahiru before she walked out.



Peko sprinted down the hallway, forcing her body to move faster even as the pit in her stomach threatened to weigh her down.

Satou could not have been far from where Princess Mahiru was, and if her young master had figured out what she had, then he wouldn’t be far either.

Peko ran and ran, and she wasn’t sure what room she’d stopped outside of but she could hear a stifled shout from inside. It was him, her young master. As she steps towards the door, she could hear Satou shouting back. Peko grabbed the doorknob, forced the door open, and charged in...

Her young master held a club in his hands, and Satou was cowed on the floor in the corner, both hands broken, her sword kicked aside across the floor, legs twisted in unnatural directions...but undoubtedly alive. Peko loosened her grip on the hilt of her sword, cold relief pouring down her shoulders.

“Peko,” Her young master didn’t even turn back to look at her, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I...Confirming that Satou is responsible. I interrogated Princess Mahiru.”

“You didn’t need to do that! I told you to leave me alone!”

“Young master, please understand, I only intended—”

“To stop me?” he snapped. “You think I’m weak, don’t you?”

“No,” Peko replied, “But young master, if you had told me you—”

“I did tell you! I told you to leave me alone! I told you I didn’t need you! And I don’t need you! I don’t need *anybody*!”

Satou tried to use her elbows to push herself up.

“Let me go, you monster!” she hissed.

“Shut the fuck up! When did I say you could speak to me, bitch?!”

Fuyuhiko raised the club and promptly brought it down on Satou’s head. The sound of Satou’s skull cracking echoed through the room and was enough to drown out the racing of Peko’s heart. Satou’s head fell sideways, hitting the floor, and blood pooled from beneath it. Peko stepped forward, pulling Fuyuhiko back before the blood could touch his feet. She had expected him to resist, but he made no effort to.

He dropped the club. “So this is...this is what you...”

He didn’t have to finish that sentence for Peko to know what he meant, but it didn’t matter now anyway.

“You’re to be king one day,” Peko said. “You cannot have blood on your hands. That is the purpose of your sword, and as your tool, young master—”

“Stop,” her young master croaked. “You’re...you’re not a—”

Peko unsheathed her sword and eyed Satou’s freshly dead body. She was not going to hesitate. The club didn’t when her young master had hit Satou on the head. She plunged the sword

into Satou's chest and took on her young master's faults as her own. She could hear him slam the door behind her and sprint into the hall and away from what he had done.

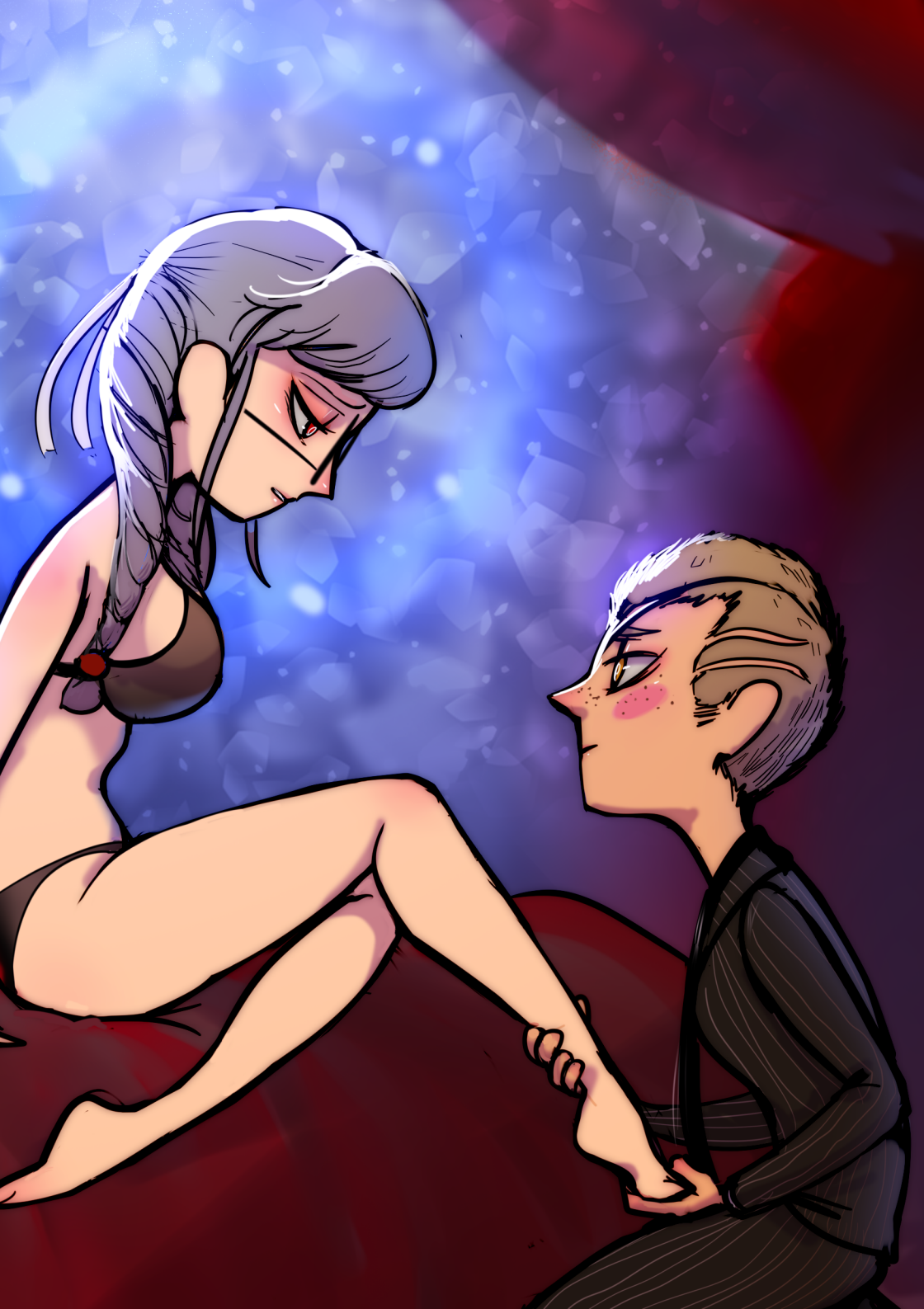
Peko simply wiped her sword and sheathed it, and cleaned her young master's involvement off of the club. She told herself that she felt nothing, that a sword could not be faulted for doing what it was made for, and hoped that her young master would forgive her for this.



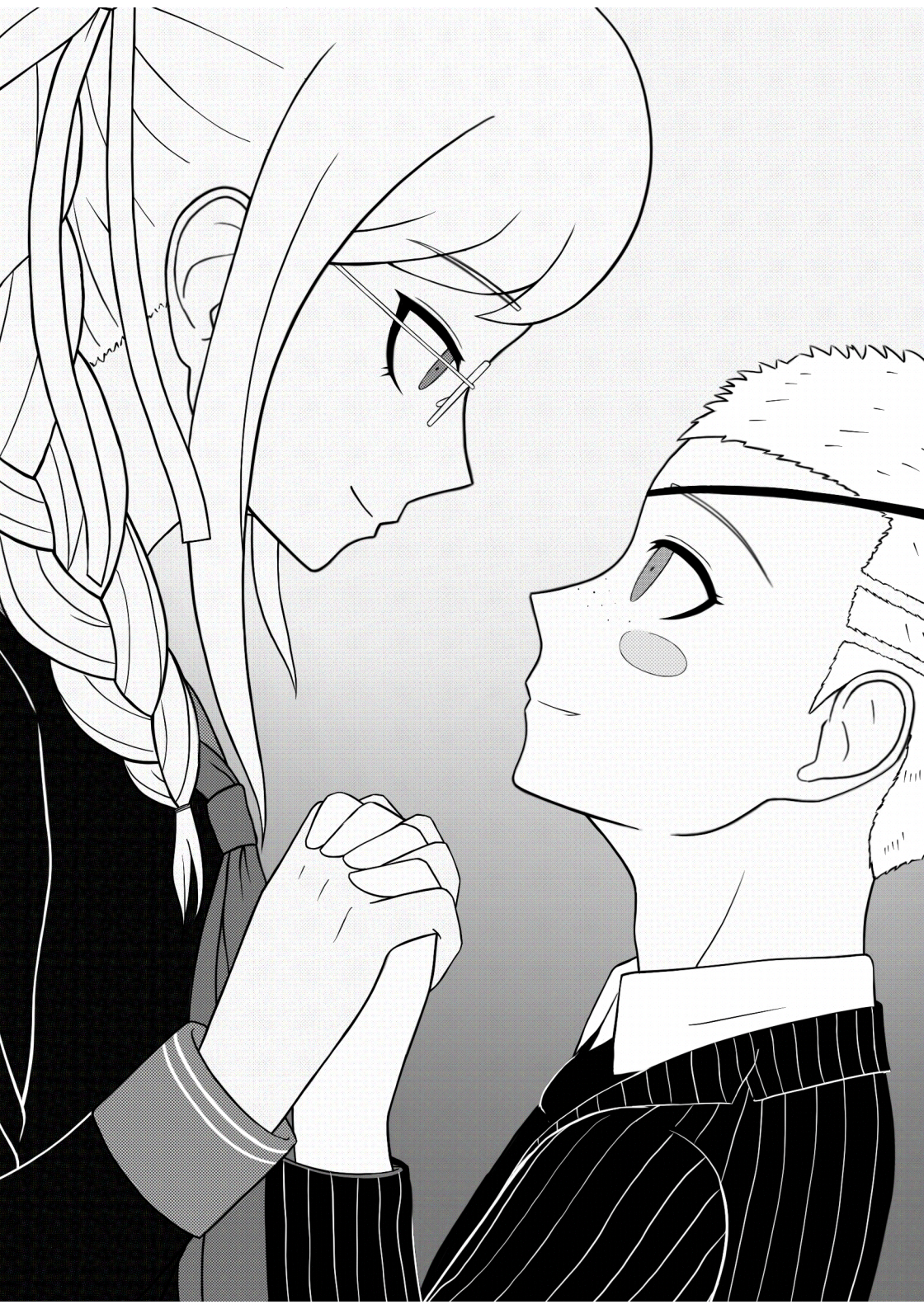












# The Quest to Pet

By Otello

Peko's outstretched hand loomed over the hamster, trembling. Her *and* the animal. Maga-Z was the most aggressive of the Devas, and still it reacted this way. Peko leaned forward and the hamster flinched.

"Enough of this foolishness!" Gundham rumbled. Maga-Z scurried up his arm and disappeared into his scarf.

"Did I move too fast...?" Peko's face was still like a stone, as always, yet Fuyuhiko could tell how she really felt. Disappointed, frustrated, blaming herself. This always happened whenever she interacted with animals, but he thought this could have been different. Gundham was...odd, to put it mildly, so the hamsters *should* be used to different people, right...?

"My Devas are powerful beings; do not let their current forms fool you. They are attuned with the magicks of this world in a way you mortals cannot possibly comprehend."

"Cut the crap and speak like a normal person, for *once*," Fuyuhiko spat.

Gundham regarded them both warily before clearing his throat. "Your vassal of steel exudes a most...uncongenial aura. Crimson Steel Elephant Maga-Z wishes not to destroy the entire island in their inevitable combat, so he magnanimously decided to spare thee instead."

So even evil demons were scared of Peko. Before Fuyuhiko could respond, Peko bowed and said, "I thank you for letting me try."

“Let’s just go, Peko.” Fuyuhiko shoved his hands into his pockets and glared ahead, hoping no one would show up and receive all the wrath brewing inside him. He was trying to do better, but it was *hard*, especially when Peko wasn’t allowing herself to feel.

“It’s fine,” she said, as if reading his mind. “I’ve come to accept that I’ll never get to pet an animal.” And yet there was still that tinge of sadness to her voice. It was something she’s wanted as long as they’ve known each other. Surely, there had to be *something* Fuyuhiko could do to make her dream come true.

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“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen that many animals.” Hajime rubs his chin in thought. “There’s crabs and fish and bugs, but that’s probably not what you’re going for.”

“Not even a squirrel or something?” But now that he said it, Fuyuhiko realized the ridiculousness of it. Why would one even be on a tropical island? No one ever heard of a squirrel burying coconuts.

Hajime thinks a few moments more before declaring, “That’s right! There’s a cow!”

“Where in the world have you been hiding a cow?”

“Maybe it wasn’t there when you explored the first island.”

“...The cow wasn’t there? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Hajime led them back to the first island, where lay the Usami Corral. It looked like the kind of farm you’d see in a kid’s book, very small and everything close together. It was only missing the



giant words to label all of the animals and objects. Though “toucan” probably wasn’t on any other farms.

But there *was* a cow. It stood there, head bobbing up and down to graze at the grass.

“I’m pretty sure I woulda remembered seeing a cow,” Fuyuhiko said.

“It wasn’t always a cow.”

“What.”

“It was a chicken first. Usami turned it into a cow.”

“You’re making that up.” But Hajime had never lied before, so why would he start now...?

“Nagito was there, too, if you don’t believe me.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Fuyuhiko would really rather...not have to deal with him. He didn’t want a lecture on how all this was some sort of test for Peko to find hope to pet an animal someday, or some crap like that.

But this cow seemed pretty unbothered by their conversation, maybe this could work. Fuyuhiko took a step closer; the animal didn’t react. So he took another step, and another. He didn’t even get a glance.

But was a cow a soft and fluffy animal? It didn’t look it, with bony joints and sharp hooves and horns. Fuyuhiko patted it on the flank. It was hard, ungiving. The sound echoed into some hollow space inside the animal.

“Wait a second....” The movements were janky, a faint whirring could be heard, the legs, on further inspection, had no actual joints. “This isn’t even a real cow, it’s some sort of robot.”

“Huh.” Hajime joined him and inspected the thing. “Well, that makes more sense than magic being real.

So, they tried rounding up one of the chickens, but they were too quick for them. The toucan was smart enough to make its exit before being accosted.

Time to try something else.

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But try as they might, there were no other mammals to be found. They split ways, which was probably for the best. It meant Fuyuhiko could sulk around the tidepools. There were plenty of animals there, but they were all hard and sharp or gooey and formless. And, of course, wet. Nothing could be fluffy when it was wet.

But how could there be nothing else on the island? There had to be, like, mice or something. Maybe there weren’t any *big* mammals around, but there had to be small ones. But small things would be scared, so—

“Heyyyyy Fuyuhiko, what’re you doing out here all by your lonesome self?” It was Ibuki; the suddenness—and volume—of her voice made him jump.

“Don’t go sneaking up on a guy like that.” He sighed angrily. “What do you want?”

“Oh, I was just going for a walk and thinking up a brand new song when I saw you and thought, ‘Hey, wasn’t he running around with Hajime earlier? What was that all about? I should go ask!’ so! That’s what I’m doing!”

Ah, right, the others might have seen all that, but Fuyuhiko was so focused on his task, on how *happy* it was going to make Peko, that he didn’t even consider how embarrassing it would have looked. But he was having no luck on his own. Hajime was a great guy and all, but he really didn’t think outside of the box. Maybe Ibuki and her...*unique* way of thinking had an answer he wasn’t thinking of.

“You haven’t seen any, like, cute animals on the island or something, have you?”

“Ohhhhhh this is for Peko, isn’t it?”

The involuntary flush to his face answered for him. Ibuki had a huge grin.

“I knew it! Did you try the cow yet?”

“It ain’t even real.”

“Huh.” Her face scrunched up in thought, which only made Fuyuhiko realize how this probably wasn’t the best idea. “What about seagulls?” she offered.

“...Seagulls?”

“Yeah, they’re always in the parking lot of the diner! And there’s usually one flying around, too!”

But were seagulls even cute? They had to be fluffy and soft, at least, feathers were always fluffy and soft. And seagulls were

*mean*, they probably wouldn't be afraid of Peko. Would they let her pet them is the question. As was....

"How are we even going to catch one?"

"Ibuki has just the idea!"

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It wasn't the most complicated of plans. It consisted of throwing fries on the ground, waiting for a seagull to show up, and then trying to grab one. But, since they could fly, it wasn't working out very well. Even Fuyuhiko throwing his jacket wasn't enough reach or speed to nab one.

"You're never going to catch one like *that*." It was Akane, who had ambled up to them.

"We're not fast enough," Ibuki pouted. "Can you use your super awesome gymnast-slash-fighter powers?"

Akane cracked her knuckles. "I got this."

"You can't punch out a seagull," Fuyuhiko said. "It needs to be unharmed."

"Yeah, yeah." Akane takes the box of fries and then sits cross-legged several feet away. She tossed them, one by one, in front of her, shrinking the distance each time. Then she had a fry in hand, held out at arm's length. The gulls flew near, hovered, then turned back. Then one was brave—or foolish—enough to grab it, fluttering away before gulping it down.

It was hard to tell if it was the same gull eating from Akane's hand, they all looked alike, but now they were snatching the fries as soon as she brought one up. The air suddenly shifted and



Akane moved, like a lightning strike. A loud squawk punctuated the air.

“Got Em!”

The seagull was surprisingly calm, despite being handled like a football. Its webbed feet kicked uselessly.

“I knew you could do it!” Ibuki ran over, scaring off the other birds. The girls hyped each other up about the epic moment, then Fuyuhiko realized: how was he going to get the seagull to Peko? He had no idea where she was, how long would it take for the seagull to start biting them?

“Hey!!! Stop being mean to those poor seagulls!” Usami had popped in from out of nowhere, startling the three students. The gull flapped and squawked again.

“We’re not doing anything *mean*, teach, promise....” Ibuki laughed nervously.

“We should be nice to all of our animal friends! And he doesn’t want to be held like that! He wants to be back with all of his friends!”

“But we need it for—” Akane began, but was cut off.

“No buts!!! Or I’ll have to give you all detention!”

Fuyuhiko sighed. “It’s fine, just let the damn bird go.”

Akane turned the other way before tossing the gull into the air; it took a moment for it to regain control, but it flew off, seemingly unharmed. “We were doing it for a really good reason, I promise!”

Fuyuhiko kicked at the pavement. Now what were they supposed to do? What other animals could possibly be left?

“As your teacher, it’s my job to help *all* my students, no matter the problem! And I’m sure I can do a better job than a silly old seagull! They don’t even have magic!”

“Actually,” Fuyuhiko said. “I think you might be able to help.”

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*I must be brave! Usami tells herself. I’ll do whatever it takes to help my students, no matter how scary it might be!* Even if the thing she was scared of was one of said students.

Fuyuhiko led a blindfolded Peko by the hand to Usami. She knew that Peko wasn’t mean and would never hurt her, but something about her was just so...it must be because rabbits are prey species and get scared by lots of things, especially taller people. Especially tall people who gave off vibes that made her want to dig a burrow and hide in it.

“What sort of animal did you say this was again?” Peko asked.

“A, er, jabberwocky,” Fuyuhiko said. “Turns out they only live here, they’re very rare. And they don’t like being looked at.” He paused. “But I beat it in a game of riddles, so I can look at it and it won’t attack me. You know how it is with these mythical things, they always keep their word.” He shot a glare at Usami, who only nodded firmly. She did *not* forget what she had promised to do.

Normally she wouldn’t let a student touch her like this, but once she heard just how *sad* Peko was, she couldn’t say no! Even though she really, really, *really* wanted to right about now. Peko’s

hand slowly made its way down, stopping when it made contact with the fur between the rabbit's ears.

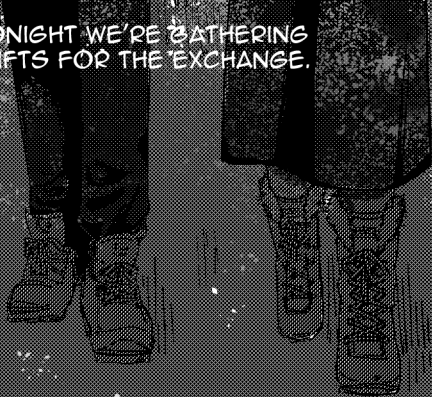
“See? It's not even running away or anything. You can pet it all you like.”

Usami did her very best not to shake or think about how she wanted to run away. It just wasn't right to be afraid of one of her students! Peko had to be a nice girl, under that scary exterior. She was the only one who could break through Fuyuhiko's shell, the only one that could always make him smile. That's the kind of happiness she wanted all of her students to have!

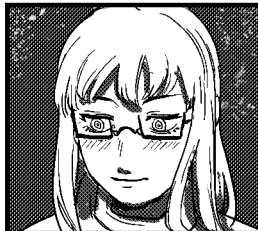
So she put everything into being the very best “jabberwocky,” to put the biggest smile ever on Peko's face.



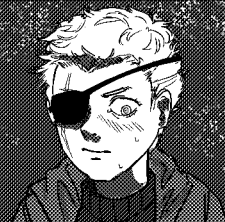
TONIGHT WE'RE GATHERING  
GIFTS FOR THE EXCHANGE.



PEKO AND I DECIDED  
TO TEAM UP.



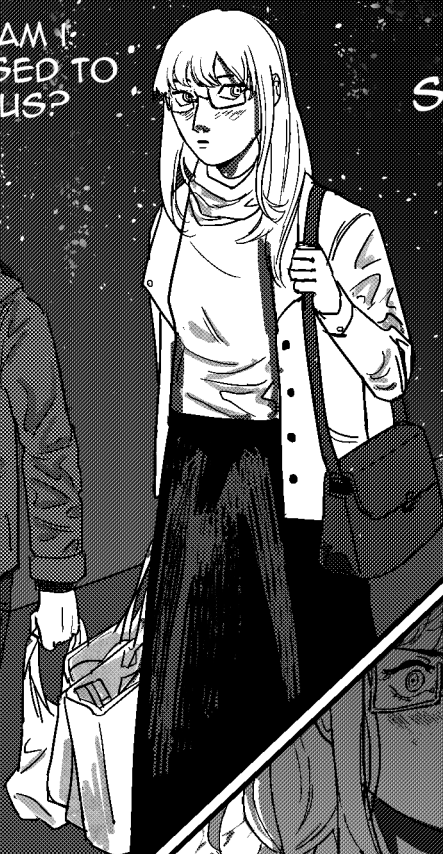
...BUT



HOW AM I  
SUPPOSED TO  
FOCUS?



SHE'S TOO  
PRETTY!









# Glimmering Rubies

By Ecchi\_Skecchii

Fuyuhiko grunted as he picked up the piece of dull metal that was lying on the beach. He shuffled his feet, trying to carry it over to the trash pile. With great effort, he managed to slam it down on the pile and wipe off his brow.

“Nice job, Kuzuryu!” Nekomaru easily set down a larger piece of debris. He had hardly broken a sweat and he still hadn’t removed his jacket.

“Thanks.” He began to pull various cans and smaller pieces of washed up trash and bring it to the pile as well. He was reminded of Monomi, who’d enforced a strict “no littering” rule during the Neo-World Program. It put a faint smile on his face as he placed the sand-caked pieces of plastic and metal into the pile. He and Nekomaru had been assigned to clean up the beach near the Future Foundation building on the second island and scavenge for more materials to continue to build small boats to travel between the islands. Kazuichi had been very clear to set the large metal debris and trash away from smaller things that looked like manufactured parts.

Nekomaru sidled up beside him. “So, have you talked to her yet?”

Fuyuhiko froze. He knew what Nekomaru was talking about, but really didn’t want to acknowledge it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nekomaru put his hand on his shoulder. “C’mon now, I know you know what I’m talking about. You know I’m talking about Pekoyama.”

Fuyuhiko groaned. “Yes, I know you’re talking about Peko!”

Nekomaru clapped his hands. “There we go! So, did you talk to her or not?”

“No, not yet.”

Nekomaru crossed his arms, studying him closely. “Why not, Kuzuryu?”

Fuyuhiko sighed. It’s not that the two *weren’t* talking. When he would leave the break room that he’d repurposed into a temporary bedroom in the pod building, he would occasionally bump into her. Sometimes, they would cross paths while out exploring and scavenging the ruins of the second island. In those moments they did talk. Technically.

Every conversation between them at this point seemed to involve greeting one another, then making some mundane comment about the weather (still polluted) or what they were needing to do that day (usually scavenge or prepare food or water). There would be some awkward laughter before a long pause. After that began the stilted goodbye, with the promise to talk more later. All throughout this, he could only meet her vermilion eyes every once in a while. Finally, he replied, “It’s just... where do I begin?”

“Well, where does it start?” Nekomaru led him over to a wide rock that they could both sit on.

Fuyuhiko sat. “Peko and I have always had a complicated relationship. We were raised together, but not as equals. Growing up, no matter what, I was above her. It didn’t matter how well she trained or how poorly I might have done, I was always the more important person.”

“All that young master stuff she keeps saying comes from that?”

“Exactly. But despite being the lower ranked person, she was expected to be better than me. She had to be mature. Any of her own interests would be suppressed in the interest of becoming more useful to me. Most people would resist that, but not Peko. Peko bought into it. You can see how much she really sees our relationship. Something lower than a master-servant relationship.”

“An owner-tool relationship.”

“And that’s never what I wanted, for either of us, you know? I wanted to be friends! I wanted her to value herself more than an object. I wanted her to be able to live like a normal person.” Fuyuhiko looked out on the water. “I thought that was attainable when we both got accepted to Hope’s Peak.

“It seemed possible. We no longer had the societal pressures that had been forced upon us at the Kuzuryu family compound. I had made it clear that we weren’t to do any of the things that we did at home, and that we were to have a normal relationship, as students. She seemed subdued for a while; being my protector was the only thing she knew, and now I was asking her to find some hobbies. In a way, I guess we were still stuck in that mindset: what she seemed to genuinely want was to protect me, and part of that was listening to exactly what my orders were. By that logic, she would be fulfilling her duty by going off and having friends. She did that, but I don’t know whether or not she actually lost that mindset and became actual friends with people or if she was just pretending to make me happy.”

“If it’s any consolation, Akane and I always enjoyed having her out training with us,” Nekomaru replied. “We never got the



feeling that she was only doing it for us. It really did feel like she was our friend.”

“Huh, I never knew you guys were training together. That is comforting to know that it at least seemed that way.” Fuyuhiko stretched. “As time went on at Hope’s Peak, I felt my feelings for her growing stronger and stronger.”

“Distance makes the heart grow fonder,” Nekomaru chimed in.

“I felt like maybe I could confess to her my feelings. Once I was able to take over the gang, after graduation, I could change the rules. She wouldn’t have to live as a tool. But then...”

“Yeah.” Nekomaru patted him on the back. “That happened.”

Fuyuhiko nodded. “I can’t fully remember everything we did. I definitely remember us remaining side by side the whole time. I remember what we did to the Diet building. Mostly though, it’s a complete haze.” He sighed. “Despair ruined everything. Then we got put in the simulation, and I was pretty much back to square one. I wanted to confess, but then the thing with Mahiru happened, and I was only able to tell her how I felt right before she died.”

“Was that the last time you talked about it?” Nekomaru asked, his deep voice gentle. Fuyuhiko nodded. “How do you feel now?”

“I don’t know. I still find her beautiful, inside and out. I find her bravery and strength inspiring. She’s amazing.” He rubbed his temple. “Despair just ruined so much. I don’t know how bad I treated her. I don’t know whether she even really returns my feelings.”

“I know that it was bad,” Nekomaru sympathized. “What we’re trying to do isn’t to live without guilt. We are all guilty of horrible, horrible things. It’s about gaining the inner strength to move forward, and part of that is acknowledging our sins and building relationships *despite* them.” Nekomaru stood. “We should probably get back to working.”

“Yeah.” Fuyuhiko stood and the two began walking back along the beach. “I’m glad we had this talk. I think I’m going to talk to her later tonight.”

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“Ms. Asahina?”

“Yes, Peko?” the peppy girl asked through the laptop.

“What stays between us here is confidential, right?”

“Yeah, mostly!” Aoi replied. “In these therapy sessions it’s important to be open and honest so we can make real progress.”

Peko looked around. The laptop they used for these mandated therapy sessions could only remain in the highest room of the building because it had to remain connected to the window-mounted satellite. It was at the top of the stairs, with no rooms next to it. A place of privacy. Nobody would overhear what she was about to say. “Is it wrong that I believe there were good things about Despair?”

Aoi froze. “Y-you should elaborate on that.”

Peko looked away from the laptop. “I guess it’s a bit of a difficult story. I was young master Fuyuhiko’s protector-”

“Just Fuyuhiko!”

“Right, I have been trying to work on that habit. I was Fuyuhiko’s protector. When we came to Hope’s Peak, we began to separate at his request. It was... a hard time in my life. I wanted nothing more than to stay by his side. I tried to go and find hobbies and make friends, but it’s hard when you don’t know how to give a genuine smile.”

“Mhm.” Aoi was scribbling down notes on her notepad.

“I’d always had feelings for him, but they grew stronger as we went through high school. I couldn’t stop thinking of all the times that we had been together in our youth. I wanted to ask him out, but I knew he was struggling with his own emotions. He’d had to repress them to save face, but now that he was free of his father’s influence, he could grapple with what he felt. I guess I didn’t feel important enough to insert myself into that process.”

“You were important enough though,” Aoi reminded. “You are a person with feelings and opinions that are valid.”

Peko felt some red go to her face. “Thank you, Ms. Asahina. Still, though, I made my choices in high school. During our time in the Neo-World, I told Hajime I wanted to confess to him and asked for advice. I know that I would have certainly acted on it... both in high school and on the island.”

“I see.” Aoi tapped her chin with her pen. “When Junko brainwashed all of you, Despair ended this chance to do so.”

“It was bad; the feelings that we felt under it, the depraved things everybody did, all of that was absolutely awful. But Despair did do something: it freed us from those crushing social roles that we would have been forced into. Fuyuhiko believed he would be given control of the gang after he graduated, but he was wrong; I heard what his father said in a meeting. He was going to hold onto it until he died, and that could have been more than 15 years; it

wasn't as if he was very old. As soon as we graduated, the two of us would have been back where we started; a tool and its owner.

"Guess we never ended up needing to worry about that. Despair happened, and for the first time we were together without those burdens on us. In the moments where we were alone together, it felt right. It felt like we could finally be together how both of us wanted to be."

"It sounds like you've loved him for a long time." Aoi said. Slowly, she continued, "I guess I can understand why Despair was an out for that."

"I never want to go back to that. We were out of that mindset, but we were committing massive atrocities. When I worked for the yakuza, I was at least taking out bad people. These were innocents." She spat on the ground. "I'm not sure I will ever get past that."

"You were brainwashed during that time. That's worth remembering."

"I suppose so." Peko wasn't fully convinced.

"What now, though? The world has ended. The Kuzuryu clan has almost been entirely wiped out. There's nothing holding either of you back." Aoi brought the topic back to Fuyuhiko.

"Well..." Peko trailed off, trying to find the right words. "I can see it in his eyes again. He's overthinking again. He's putting up walls to protect me from him, probably because of what we've been through. Despair. Watching me die a brutal death protecting him. All of those things have caused him to fall back into repressing his emotions again. All of our conversations seem to revolve around the weather, of all things. It's never any different."

“May I offer some advice?”

“Sure.”

“I think the two of you need to get alone. I think you two need to have a real talk. You treat his emotions as valid and important, clearly, but your feelings are just as important. Both of you need to come to an understanding with each other, because it seems like both of you are assuming what’s good for each other. You guys need to establish what each of you really want from each other.” Aoi paused. “At least, that’s what I think. I can’t make you do it, but I think it would be a really good idea.”

“I think you’re probably right.” Peko stretched her arms and sighed. The tiny clock in the corner of the screen signaled that it was about time to wrap up. Her and Aoi said their goodbyes, and that they would see each other next week. She stood and left, brushing past Sonia as she went in for her session. She and Fuyuhiko would talk tonight. It wasn’t a viable option to not.

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Fuyuhiko was waiting outside the makeshift cafeteria. Teruteru had whipped up some stew tonight, which most people could eat other than himself. Something about what he was doing during despair, but it was the best option available with the given food. He hadn’t seen Peko yet, so he was waiting after finishing his dinner quickly.

“Hey.” He jumped as he heard a voice behind him. He turned, and saw Peko standing right behind him.

“Oh, hey, Peko.” He froze, that awkward feeling rushing over him.



She was looking down, rubbing her wrist. She looked nervous too. "Can we talk?"

Fuyuhiko's heart started racing. "Y-yes! I actually wanted to talk to you too."

Peko looked up at him. Her ruby-red eyes were glimmering with emotion. "Let's go somewhere more private."

"Yeah, that would be good." Fuyuhiko agreed. The two walked down the hall, passing the bedrooms, before arriving at the pod room. Only Hajime ever came in here, and Fuyuhiko had just laid eyes on him in deep conversation with Nagito. They would have some time.

Peko spoke before he could open his mouth. "I think we need to be honest with each other. We've been avoiding one another. I think we both know that."

"Yeah," Fuyuhiko agreed guiltily. "We have been."

"Why is that?" The question was short, but not sharp or curt.

Fuyuhiko thought for a moment before responding. "I guess I'm just trying to give you space. We've always been... complicated."

"We have been, but it's always been like that, and we haven't always discussed whether it's raining or just cloudy today." She adjusted her sleeves.

"I just..." Fuyuhiko looked away. "I don't remember anything about our time in despair. I don't know if any of your scars were because of me. I know that we're dangerous... and I don't want to hurt you. Ever. I'm just worried that my emotions will get the better of me, or that I'll relapse." He looked up at her. She was staring through misty eyes.

“You... you never hurt me, Fuyuhiko. Despair was the one place that we were able to be together, uninhibited. Now that we can think clearly... that’s what I want again.”

Fuyuhiko’s heart was leaping into his throat. “Peko...”

“I feel stronger about you than a friend would. I certainly feel stronger than a personal guardian. I love you, Fuyuhiko. I know that I do.” She clasped his hand. “I would like to be with you, as a girlfriend. We’re free of the chains that bound us. Let’s embrace it.”

“Peko...” Fuyuhiko had to force the words out, the surge of emotions coming on. “I wanted to say the same thing. I really, really love you. So much more than I can express. It’s like I said, I want you. Only you. You’re beautiful and strong.” He squeezed her hand. “It might take some time to really work out my emotions and the things I’ve been dealing with, but I know that I love you.”

Peko wrapped her arm around, placing her hand on the small of his back, pulling him close to her. “I would love nothing more than to stay by your side while we work through ourselves together.”

Fuyuhiko looked up into those eyes. They looked like glimmering rubies. “May I kiss you, Peko Pekoyama?”

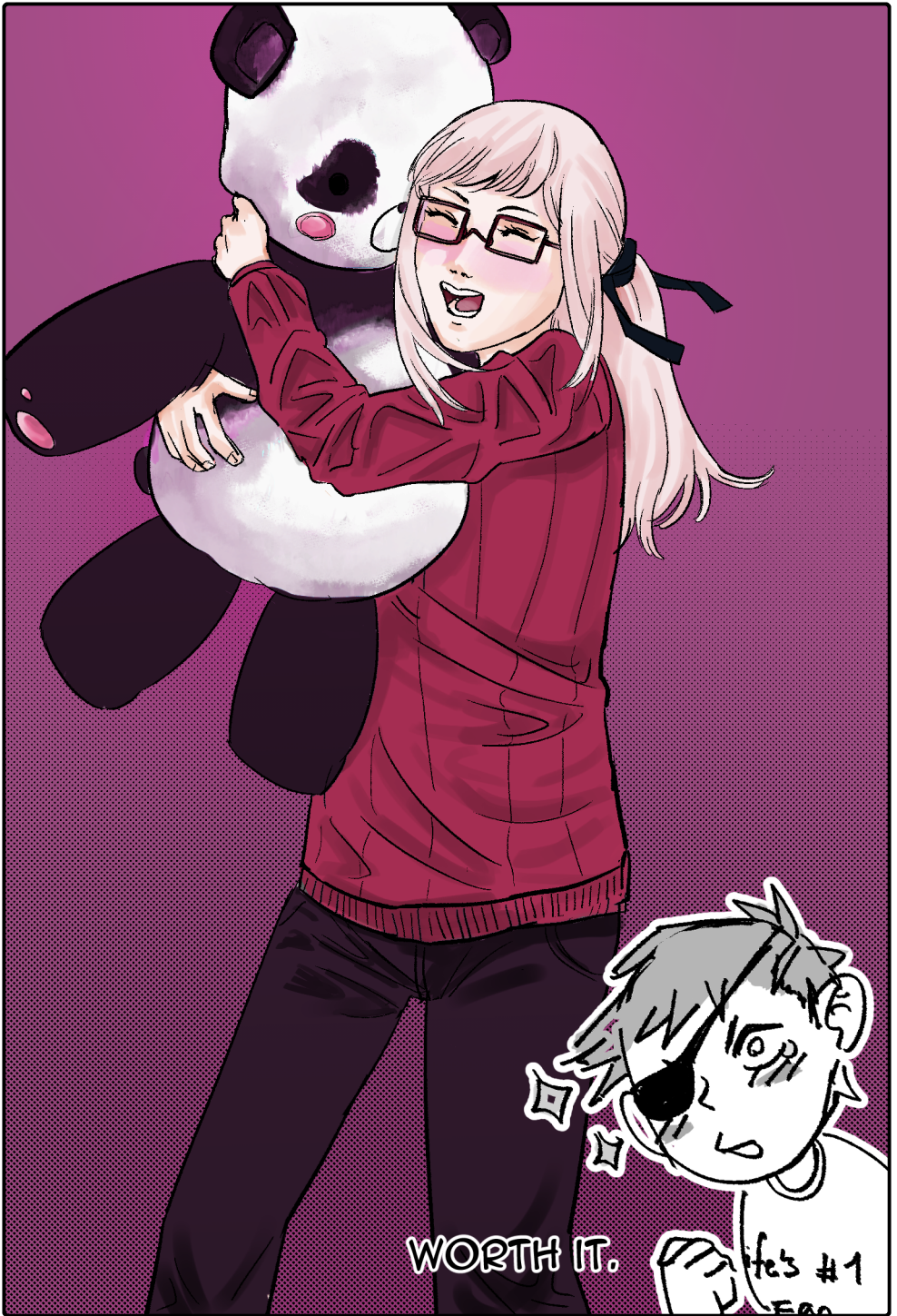
Peko giggled, her normally serious face cracking into a smile that he adored. “Of course, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu.” They finally shared what they’d wanted for so long: their first kiss, uninhibited by a strict family or brain-addled by an insane teenage girl. Their first kiss in the relationship that would hopefully last for the rest of their days.











WORTH IT.

Life's #1  
V ERO

Only you ♡



# réplique

By miravrse

**Fuyuhiko.**

There is—

the metallic stench of blood clinging to my lips. The first time I meet a girl, I am twelve and she is pretty. Cold, I feel mass weighing down with the burden of every snowflake burning into my skin.

There is—

An ache, at the pit of my stomach, that feels a lot less like the pain that tore through my body when I heard about my sister. I wrap with an arm tightly around my ribs, warmth seeking refuge, and there are the corpses of wilted flowers crumpling beneath my feet.

There is—

surprise stirring chaos in my chest, and I wonder, when I look at her, if she is a cloud misplaced from the sky. I study the rogue blush on her cheeks, and the pang of disappointment stabbing through my brittle chest as she talks of herself like my weapon; not a friend.

No. My eyes flicker away as the stray ember of a fire and

There is—

heat when our shoulders collide. A pair of eyes pin an arrow to the back of my neck, and I know this is love.

**Peko.**

There is—

the sting of frost on my outstretched hand. The first time I meet a boy, I am twelve and he is scarred. Cold, a shiver of fear and some bitterness prickling against my spine.

There is—

An ache, somewhere in my chest, that feels a lot less like the adoration that ignited in my body, when the urge to hold him overwhelmed me. I drop a neglected hand to my side, pressing it to my skirt with a dying smile fighting for its place on my lips.

There is—

surprise in his eyes that looks no less like the bitterness that he carries with his slouched, shallow body. I cannot win against the heat swarming in my cheeks like the summer mayflies and bees, and there is an inexplicable sense of fondness crawling out of the crevices of my chest. I am his friend.

Yes, I stand by his side like a sword but

There is—

heat when our shoulders collide. My eyes search for his but find only disappointment, but I know this is love.



I never needed a tool



So you didn't need to become a tool



You just needed to be yourself



I just wanted you!



Only You

# Zine Contributors

## Cover Artist



**Anh**

*Page 1*

*Tumblr*

*thewildwilds*

## Merch Artists



**Alex**

*Icons and wallpapers*

*Tumblr*

*amarylii-art*

*IG amarylii*



**Jenna!**

*Sticker*

*Tumblr/Twitter/IG*

*it'schiakie*



**Oli**

*Emotes*

*Twitter*

*cockar00miss*

*IG cockar00.miss*

## Page Artists



**Atlas\*white**

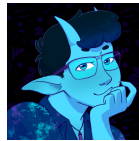
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*atlas-white*

*Twitter*

*atlaswhiteart*



**Bluejayboju**

*Page 51*

*Tumblr/Twitter/IG*

*bluejayboju*



## Caeboa

**Page 21**

*Tumblr/Twitter/IG*  
caeboa



## Capnii

**Page 5**

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## Emeline

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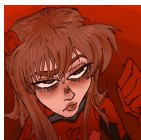
*Twitter and IG*  
emeslines



## Evie

**Page 36 and 52**

*IG*  
\_raines\_jupiter



## Grace

**Page 7**

*Tumblr/Twitter/IG*  
ratrangoon



## Melissa

**Page 54**

*Tumblr and Twitter*  
Foryoupeko  
*IG* Suraelisart



## Puppy

**Page 50**

*Tumblr*  
vampuplove  
*Twitter*  
lesbiankuzupeko



## Ocean

**Page 22**

*Tumblr/Twitter/IG*  
empirez0



## Muria

**Page 49**

*Tumblr* muria-art  
*Twitter* sildelylad  
*IG* murla\_s



## Neenack

**Page 8**

*Twitter* neontendo  
*Carrd* neenack



**Rin**

*Page 25*

*IG rins\_teabox*



**Smalls**

*Page 37*

*Twitter*

*SlothTruffles*

*IG*

*faunaverse.art*



**Newatoda**

*Page 35*

*Twitter newatoda*



**Zoë Peña**

*Page 23*

*Tumblr and Twitter*

*AquaSpiderArt*

## Writers



**Ecchi\_Skechii**

*Page 39*

*Twitter*

*ecchi\_skechii*

*AO3*

*Ecchi\_Skechii*



**KawaiiGroovycat**

*Page 9*

*Tumblr*

*cloudbreaker11037*

*Twitter and AO3*

*KawaiiGroovycat*



**Mira**

*Page 53*

*Twitter*

*miravrse*



**Otello**

*Page 26*

*Twitter*

*otellojonsson*

## Organizer



**Arbit**

*Tumblr*

*arbitrarydelight*